

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

***Close Readings***  
**Exhibition Series**

Smack Mellon is pleased to host the second iteration of the *Close Readings* series. This exhibition series presents a new commission by one under-recognized, early, or mid-career artist in Gallery One along with an accompanying exhibition in Gallery Two that uses the central commission as a curatorial framework. This program extends our support for interdisciplinary artists by building conversations around their practices in addition to facilitating the realization of ambitious, site-specific projects.

Guest curated by Muheb Esmat, this edition of *Close Readings* pairs a solo exhibition by Aziz Hazara with a group exhibition featuring the works of Morehshin Allahyari, Hangama Amiri, and Fatemeh Kazemi. The exhibitions center the artists' investigations of the complex and manifold matters of everyday life as experienced in their home countries. Together the exhibitions explore the root sources and common language available for understanding the contemporary moment in its immeasurable diversity and ever-changing status.

**[Gallery One]**

**Aziz Hazara**  
***It's Only Sound That Remains***

**November 6, 2022–January 8, 2023**

In his solo exhibition, Aziz Hazara examines sound as a powerful repository for memory, recognition, and a source of critical reflection in contemporary Afghanistan. Curated by Muheb Esmat, the exhibition brings together two large-scale video installations by Hazara that highlight the sonic performativity of power and politics in the everyday. Through two distinct acoustic experiences: a mourning ritual, and Kabul's soundscape during the most recent regime change, the works in this exhibition portray sounds as a formidable agent and medium for personal and social transformation.

In *Takbir* (2021), a young man slowly beats his chest while maintaining unflinching eye contact with the camera. The actor's rhythmically repeated action resembles a mourning ritual performed in crowds during Ashura, an annual event that theatrically symbolizes the struggle against injustice. Here Hazara expands on how sound conditions and contours subjectivity. Whereas the sounds of a collective act of mourning validate certain politics, the singular act performed by an individual outside of the polis holds the possibility of presenting a counter-history. Reflected in the embodied sound of flesh beating flesh is a rumination on the body as a site of mortality, vulnerability, and agency. Besides attesting to the physical toll continuous injustice inflicts on the mourning body, *Takbir* also ponders how to situate the sound of mourning when there is no communal language and consensus for a loss.

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Also on view, *Takbir* (2022) presents a nocturnal panorama of a city on the verge of tectonic change, catalyzed by the ending of the American occupation of Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban, pushing the local subjects into an interminably spectral state. The barking sounds of stray dogs roaming Kabul's streets at night are sporadically interrupted by the sounds of military aircraft and citizens shouting "Allahu Akbar" ("God is great") from their rooftops in a proverbial call often deployed at times of distress, joy, and resistance. In this case, it was an outcry against the Taliban's return, which was quickly co-opted into a campaign for last-minute legitimacy by the outgoing Afghan government. A grainy shot of an American surveillance balloon slowly fades into the horizon, giving way to the Taliban's distinct sonic regime reverberating through the city. Drawing on these moments as remnants of a longer history, Hazara underscores how power and agency are alternately exercised and stripped through sound and its ability to disintegrate and reconfigure spaces.

The exhibition takes its title from the eponymous book by Asadullah Safi memorializing the music produced by Ahmad Zahir (1946-79), one of Afghanistan's most celebrated pop stars. Zahir's posthumous fame and undeniable place in public memory are linked to the weight of a social history intertwined with the sounds of his music, bestowing upon his work a cultural significance that lives beyond the span of human life. Hazara's works expand on this expression to include the possibility of eternity in all sonic constructions, exploring sounds as more than a visceral marker of a given moment and highlighting the urgency for understanding the role of sound within the politics of power.

## [Gallery Two]

### *Always In My Heart*

November 6, 2022–January 8, 2023

**Artists: Morehshin Allahyari, Hangama Amiri, Fatemeh Kazemi**

This exhibition of works by Morehshin Allahyari, Hangama Amiri, and Fatemeh Kazemi explores the artists' shared inquiry into popular visual and textual idioms of love, desire, and intimacy in each of their respective identity positions. *Always In My Heart* brings together textiles, drawings, printed matter, and a web-based project that highlight how pop-culture idioms fall short of expressing all of what the heart can hold. The widely circulated personal and commercial expressions that appear in the artists' works, though often seen as banal, offer vehicles for understanding the gendered limitations that underlie their formation. By highlighting the voids in these visual languages, they offer a metric for that which is left unexpressed.

In Allahyari's web-based work *Like Pearls* (2014), from where the exhibition takes its title, the artist presents a glittery mashup of GIFs, heavily censored images of models, and textual idioms collected from Farsi email spam for online lingerie stores in Iran. Playing the Backstreet Boys' hit "I Want It That Way" softly in the background, this installation prompts viewers to click through an animated digital collage, generating spam-like pop-up windows and revealing snippets of marketing language that caters

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to a generic masculine viewpoint—the clientele imagined by these online stores. Allahyari’s work is a case study of the persistent objectification of women’s bodies across digital spaces in service of male desire, as well as the patriarchal norms bound to common sentiments of love and desire that are in high circulation.

Hangama Amiri’s *When I Am With You* (2021) is an intricately sewn textile that combines a Farsi poem of love and endearment with a weeping eye, red lips, and three postcards of Bollywood film stars at the corners. Amiri’s work reproduces common tropes of romance and intimacy, reminiscent of the diaries of high school lovers. Here, poetic symbolism and Bollywood stars serve as a vehicle for smuggling in expressions of love and desire, subtly subverting the social and cultural norms that restrict this gendered language from a female-centric perspective in Afghanistan. The prevalence of these foreign stars is both an ode to the enormous presence Bollywood films have in the country and a reflection of lingering social anxieties that prevent the creation of a nuanced and inclusive language of romance.

In *Despair and Die* (2021), Fatemeh Kazemi constructs an intimate space for processing grief. Central to the installation is a book that chronicles the lamentation of a heavy heart through a fragmented narrative assembled from common Farsi idioms, drawings, and photographs sourced from family archives and found online. This installation builds on Kazemi’s practice of exploring the aesthetics of everyday life found in trivial and marginalized spaces and expressions. By employing these visual and symbolic representations of grief, the artist actively questions tired clichés—often used to express universal emotions—for the limits of what they are able to declare.

## **Bios:**

**Aziz Hazara** (b.1992), lives and works between Berlin and Kabul. Education: Bachelor’s of Fine Arts, Beaconhouse National University, Lahore, Pakistan. He is currently a KFW residency artist hosted by Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin Germany. He has shown his works at various exhibitions nationally and internationally such as “Gardens as Thought Form: Lexicons for Revolution” Experimenter, Kolkata, 2021; “Words At An Exhibition: Exhibition In Ten Chapters And Five Poems” Busan Biennale in Busan South Korea, 2020; NIRIN 22nd Biennale of Sydney in Sydney Australia, 2020; “No End in Sight”, Hessel Museum of Art Bard College, in New York USA, 2020; “Kharmohra”, at the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations (MuCEM), in Marseille France, 2019, amongst others. He has also participated in various residential programmes such as “Colombo-scope” in Jaffna Sri Lanka 2021, at the Embassy of Foreign Artists (EoFA), Geneva Switzerland, 2020; at the Camargo Foundation, Cassis France, 2019 and at KHOJ international artists’ association, New Delhi India, 2017. Hazara is the main prize winner of the 6th Edition of the Future Generation Art Prize - PinchukArtCentre (2021).

**Morehshin Allahyari** is a NY based Iranian-Kurdish artist using 3D simulation, video, sculpture, and digital fabrication as tools to re-figure myth and history. Through archival practices and storytelling, her work weaves together complex counternarratives in opposition to the lasting influence of Western technological colonialism in the context of SWANA (Southwest Asia and North Africa). Her work has been part of numerous exhibitions, festivals, and workshops at venues throughout the world, including the New Museum, MoMa, Centre Pompidou, Venice Biennale di Architettura, and Museum für Angewandte Kunst among many others. She is the recipient of The United States Artist Fellowship (2021), The Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Grant (2019), The Sundance Institute New Frontier International Fellowship (2019), and the Leading Global Thinkers of 2016

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award by Foreign Policy magazine. Her artworks are in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Current Museum. She has been featured in The New York Times, BBC, Huffington Post, Wired, National Public Radio, Parkett Art Magazine, Frieze, Rhizome, Hyperallergic, and Al Jazeera, among others.

**Hangama Amiri** (b. 1989, Kabul, Afghanistan) holds an MFA from Yale University where she graduated in 2020 from the Painting and Printmaking Department. She received her BFA from NSCAD University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and is a Canadian Fulbright and Post-Graduate Fellow at Yale University School of Art and Sciences (2015-2016). Her recent exhibitions include *Henna Night/ Shabe Kheena* (2022) at David B. Smith Gallery, Denver, CO; *Mirrors and Faces* (2021) at Cooper Cole Gallery, Toronto, ON; *Wandering Amidst the Colors* (2021) at Albertz Benda, New York, NY; *Spectators of a New Dawn*, Towards Gallery, Toronto, ON; *Bazaar: A Recollection of Home* at T293 Gallery, Rome, Italy, and *Reminiscences* at Union Pacific gallery in London, UK. Her upcoming solo institution exhibitions will open respectively in February 2023 at Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT.

**Fatemeh Kazemi** (b. 1992, Tehran) is a Syracuse-Based artist and Co-Founder of ROSVA Magazine, pursuing her practice in multidisciplinary arenas to merge her different interests in different projects. She earned her Bachelor's degree in Painting at the University of Tehran. Recently, she is studying for a Master of Fine Art in Studio Art at Syracuse University. Fatemeh's approach is focused on the process and context of creation, to spotlight the very period during which the work was built. She employs an amalgamation of media such as video, installation, writing, and performance that serve as research into themes of ritual, subculture, and archival memory. Fatemeh uses a multitude of sources as a starting point, from theoretical text to a new word or memory, to weave together.

**Muheb Esmat** is an independent curator and writer currently based in New York.

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